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Orchard Beach

Vincent Preti

University of Colorado Boulder, vipr9475@colorado.edu

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Vincent Preti

Religious Studies Departmental Honors
University of Colorado Boulder

Honors Thesis Advisor:

Dr. Deborah Whitehead, Religious Studies

Committee Members:

Dr. Holly Gayley, Religious Studies

Dr. Scarlet Bowen, Women and Gender Studies

Special Thanks to:

Dr. Sam Gill, Religious Studies

Prof. Sean Hemmerle, School of Visual Arts, NY

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For Rosalie and Aldo



ROSALIE & ALDO

Orchard Beach

-Vincent Aldo Preti-

A blizzard hit New York City the day my grandfather drove to his first Catholic retreat. It was 1958. Weather delayed, Aldo and his fellow retreat-goers ended up missing their orientation. My grandfather arrived at the Passionist center just after the vows of silence had been initiated. Since he couldn't speak, Aldo gestured as if playing Charades until a brother showed him to his single dormitory; the room was awfully cold. Unable to find a thermostat or the source of the draft, he finally gave up and lay down to sleep. Aldo woke numerous times throughout the night to put on more layers of clothing: first his pants, then his dress shirt, until finally he lay down dressed with his full suit and parka. Before falling asleep, he had a realization: the cold was an integral part of the retreat experience. On the third and final day, after morning prayers, the vow of silence was lifted. Aldo eagerly praised the brothers' resiliency and dedication. He told them how inspired he was by their commitment to their faith; day in and day out, they lived in this frigid environment to better understand their God. One of his friends, who had been appraised of the building during orientation, laughed, "What do you mean, Aldo? You didn't see the thermostat underneath the bed?"

What hit me more than this story itself was what my grandmother said after recounting it: *"Your grandfather was in his glory, suffering for his God."*

Although today—seven years after my grandfather's passing—my grandma Rosalie recounts the stories, it was Aldo who was the storyteller. My Pop-Pop Aldo was born a mile away from the funeral home where my family said our last goodbyes to him in 2009. He was born in 1926 as a first generation Bronx-Italian during The Great Depression; his strict

upbringing, his World War II veteran status, and his Roman Catholic deaconhood formed my family's deep respect for him.

Aldo's engaging stories and Rosalie's unforgettable cooking are among the fondest, most vivid memories I hold; a sensorial explosion occurs when remembering our weekly suppers. Similar to one of Pavlov's dogs, I salivated the closer my father's Volvo got to my grandparent's house in The Bronx. Each leg of the drive was a stimulus: the steady, mechanical hum of the draw bridge as we passed Co Op City, the rhythmic click of the turn signal as we got off the Hutch Parkway at exit 3W, and finally, the jerk of the car as we turned left onto Hering Avenue.

Running to the door, my brother and I couldn't wait to play our usual game. My father taught my brother and me to "hide" on the sides of the doorframe so that when my grandmother opened the door, she "couldn't find us." Once we popped out to reveal ourselves, we'd wait in line for Rosalie's double cheek embrace. If I forgot to kiss her other cheek, Rosalie stood there playfully waiting until we finished our ritual. Dumping our coats on the sunroom chair, my brother Tom and I would race to press the intercom button to signal to my grandfather that we had arrived. He was always upstairs writing his homilies. I can still hear the resonance in my grandfather's voice as he often responded through the intercom, "I'll be down in just a minute." In the kitchen, whiffs of chicken cutlets browning on top of a bed of sizzling olive oil overwhelmed my senses, stealing my attention away from Rosalie's questions about school.

Rosalie prepared supper while Aldo held court at the head of the dinner table. Though we'd always ask grandma if she needed any help, with a *mappina* thrown across her shoulder and steam fogging up her glasses, she'd invariably assure us that she had everything under control.

Prayers were the barrier between our hunger and our satiation. Us grandkids—Bob, Lisa, Tom, and I—would bow our heads, wrinkling the coarse tablecloth between our fingers, anticipating the words: “...from thy bounty through Christ, Our Lord, Amen.” Then we would raise our heads and lean forward, like racehorses in the starting gate, awaiting Rosalie’s words “Buon Appetito.”

Aldo’s stories began during Rosalie’s intermission. As Rosalie exited to prepare dessert, grandpa scouted objects from the table and meticulously set them in front of himself. Using forks, knives, salt and pepper shakers, and wine corks, he crafted a diorama, setting the bounds of his story. When clearing the dinner table, my cousins and I knew two things: don’t take grandpa’s glass of red wine or the utensils he used to illustrate his stories. Never changing, his stories focused on his time in Manila in WWII, his trips working for ITT, and the time that he spent throughout his life in the best place on earth: The Bronx. Pop-Pop was a lobbyist for his home borough. He explained that “*The Bronx*,” (not to be confused with “Bronx,”) had all that one could ever want and need: Yankee Stadium, Arthur Avenue, Fordham University, The Botanical Gardens, The Bronx Zoo, and Orchard Beach.

The dioramas of Aldo’s stories were not confined to cutlery and salt and pepper shakers on the dinner table. He turned his basement into “Café Preti”—which is still intact today—decorated with red and green plastic grapes hanging from the ceiling, a stationary bicycle with a Styrofoam baguette placed in its basket, fake blue shutters, three small tables each staged with a wine-bottle-turned-candle-holder, and a newspaper stand with papers from my grandfather’s world travels.

When I needed to excuse myself from the dinner table to use the bathroom, I would swing down the steps and enter my grandfather’s café. At the bottom of the stairs is a green

wooden gate that separates the café from Aldo's workbench. Three of Pop-Pop's oil paintings hang on the gate: one of John F. Kennedy painted after the president's assassination, one of a bloody thorn crowned Jesus and his disciples, and one large portrait of God; this trio is the true Catholic-American trinity. The center image of the triptych portrays a Zeus-like God emerging from white clouds that surround him, his long, greyish-white beard drooping down onto his bright orange cloak. With a judging gaze, his eyebrows are furrowed while looking toward the bottom left side of the painting. The image has always frightened me.

The anxieties provoked by this painting trace back to my earliest schooling. To honor Aldo's recommendation, my parents enrolled my brother and me in Catholic school from Pre-Kindergarten up until eighth grade. When my teachers redecorated their classrooms—replacing St. Paddy's Day leprechauns and clovers with Easter bunnies and crosses—I knew that it wouldn't be long before Aldo would come visit my school. With slide projections in one hand and sermon notes in the other, my grandfather entered the school doors to give his annual Stations of the Cross lecture. All of us students flocked into the church adjacent to our classrooms to listen to Aldo's speech. Some teachers sat with their students; most moved into the front few rows—they were fangirls of sorts. Sister Brenda, our principal, walked in front of the altar, where Aldo's projection screen was set up, and introduced him to the school. Many of my friends turned and looked at my brother and me when they heard the name "Preti." Tom and I felt like we knew a star.

Then, Aldo took the stage and began with an opening prayer; I put my hands together and glanced between my grandfather and the cross. Though I was more interested in running my fingers along the wood-carved crosses in front of every pew, I listened to my grandfather lecture. Aldo's figure was framed in images of the ancient city of Jerusalem, Jesus carrying his cross, and

the tomb of his resurrection. Aldo's laser pointer shakily highlighted details of his projections as well as parts of the church.

Looking back now, I realize just how strange those events were. The configuration in the church paralleled my belief system at the time: Aldo was positioned closer to God than I was and, since I was Aldo's grandson, I was closer to God than my peers. This led to my heightened need for moral perfection.

In Catholicism, it is thought that Jesus performed six out of the seven sacraments; marriage was the only rite of passage that he did not go through. Aldo was a Catholic clergy member but he was not a priest, therefore he was able to get married in addition to completing the other six rites. Aldo Preti completed more sacraments than Jesus Christ. This comparison never amounted to anything more than a joke at family dinners. However, hearing this when I was a child further blurred the lines between Jesus and Aldo, between what was numinous and what was familial.

Although now a lost tradition, for years the Preti family regularly visited Orchard Beach. In the 1930s, building mogul Robert Moses commissioned the construction of what most would see as a natural beach—it's not. After filling a third of Pelham Bay Park with landfill, Moses relocated over 300,000 tons of sand from the Rockaways and Sandy Hook to craft the now 115-acre beach. The beach is just a few miles from my grandparent's home.

In many ways, the unique history of the beach reflects the characters that frequent it. On any given day in the summer, people of varied cultures can be found staking out their ten-by-ten-foot lot to enjoy the Long Island Sound. Palm trees, hammocks, and coconut vendors—images associated with an ideal beach—are replaced with a giant radio tower, broken splinter-ridden

benches, and vendors selling shaved ice and pirated DVDs. Competing boom boxes underneath Puerto Rican, Italian, and Jamaican flags fill the sections of the shoreline. Urban birdwatchers lace up their boots and venture onto Hunter's Island (a small woody area connected to Orchard Beach) to get a glimpse of one of the few owls. Groups of elderly people commune on park benches, condescendingly snickering at the young—perhaps to mask their own longing for adolescence.

Orchard Beach has meant something different to each generation in my family. To my grandfather, the beach was another reason why The Bronx was the finest borough in the city. In fact, when my Tuscan cousin Niccolò and his father arrived for their first New York City visit, my grandfather immediately escorted them to the beach. I'm sure that Yankee Stadium or Times Square would have been more desirable than a man-made beach whose glory days had long passed.

My father and his cousins only visited Orchard Beach a few times throughout the year, even though they lived a mile from it. The beach was a rare excursion for them, just like the infrequent trip to McDonalds or Sizzlers. When I told my Uncle Mike that I had learned to drive at the beach's parking lot, he laughed, explaining that he had learned "more than just how to drive a car at that beach." I didn't ask for clarification.

Unlike my uncle, both my brother and I really did learn how to drive in the beach's parking lot. The beach was where my parents and I ventured if we knew that traffic to Jones Beach was horrendous. My mom rollerbladed along the boardwalk and my dad often took my brother and me to ride our bikes during our "guys' days."

When my ideological spine and logistical compass broke in my youth, it was no surprise that I sought out Orchard Beach for refuge.

Writing is odd. After an event happens, we have the ability to describe it in as much detail as we choose. Years of adversity, struggle, and internal pain can be condensed into the generic phrase “High school was hard.” Occurrences like being cyber-bullied by a football player posing as a friendly girl on Facebook can be simply explained as “I learned a lot about myself.” Looking to your teachers for approval because independence felt like abandonment could be phrased as, “I built great relationships with my teachers.” Getting involved in just about every school organization because a boy could never quite find his niche could be condensed into, “I was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities.” Nights where I wandered the streets of my neighborhood with no comforting place to land can be summarized as “I’m glad because those times shaped me into the person that I am today.”

High school was hard. I learned a lot about myself. I built great relationships with my teachers. I was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities. I’m glad because those times shaped me into the person that I am today.

College turned out to be not all that different, although I thought that phase of my life would somehow rid me of my personal ailments. After a discouraging first semester at a Chicago film school in the fall of 2012, I transferred back home to New York to plan my next move. I spent every night during that interim period circling around Westchester County painting the roads with my anxiety and depression. I sought advice from almost everyone I encountered at home—hoping someone held the wisdom that would snap me out of my melancholic state and place me on an upward trajectory. At one point, I was harshly criticized when a family member asserted that I sought out advice from others but failed to listen to it. This was their explanation for my paralysis—my inability to choose a school or even decide what I wanted for dinner. In

hindsight, I see the complete opposite—my paralysis was due to holding the philosophies of others too close to heart. The well-known Christian line “What Would Jesus Do?” expanded through the years. What would Aldo Preti do? What would Shakyamuni Buddha do? What would Alan Watts do? Emerson? My brother Tom? The barista at the coffee shop? My doctor? It was not long before these inquires became an all encompassing “What Would A-Z Do?”

My struggle at home reached a climax ten days after the New Year of 2014. While driving with a friend, my SUV hit a patch of black ice and slid, accelerating down a steep hill. As I attempted to gain control, I spotted a blue Jeep parked directly in my path, and then blacked out. I awoke to find the hood of my car smashed into the parked vehicle; somehow, no airbags deployed. I turned to my friend to make sure that she was okay. Besides being startled she felt fine. I stepped out of the car and immediately slipped on the ground, sliding further down the hill. I tried standing up, avoiding the shards of glass scattered on the ice patch. That night, after a police officer drove me home, I sprawled out on my living room carpet. My entire body was cramping in pain.

A few days after the accident, I was in complete despair: my outlook was darkening and my body was inflamed and stiff. Lying in bed, I touched my hand to my forehead, then to my chest, one tap on each side, and returned my hands back together, a familiar gesture; I began to pray. I stopped my internal monologue suddenly when I realized I had just called God “sir.” I quickly performed the sign of the cross, exited my prayer session, and reflected on what I had just said.

My framework of God remained consistent throughout my life—*He* was always something other-worldly and superior. My routine interactions with God remained consistent too—most nights before bed I would put my hands together to pray. What had changed over the

years, however, were the pieces that filled in this framework. As a child, the pieces were the pressures to be a moral Catholic boy, to fulfill my school duties, and to respect my elders. All of this was constructed by way of Catholic school classes, Aldo's sermons, and my imagination. That night, a few days after the crash, I realized that the "God" I prayed to had changed: it was now an entanglement, a conglomeration of all that I feared. The pieces of this "God" included Aldo's potential disapproval of my life choices, various conflicting dogmatic creeds that I couldn't resolve, and the overall fear of inadequacy.

If this is what God had become, had praying become merely a way for me to cover all of my bases? Was prayer a nightly apology for my daily transgressions? Was I repenting preemptively because I couldn't know for sure which ideologies were right? That night, I sat upright in bed with Aldo's oil painting of God in mind. This judgmental depiction of God hanging in my grandfather's basement was the crux of this clash of the numinous, the familial, the fearful.

Throughout my adolescence, my growing anxieties about God paralleled my worsening physical and emotional conditions. During early high school, I experienced occasional lightheadedness and dizzy spells—nothing major. But it got worse. I began to wake up in the middle of the night frozen with sleep paralysis, trying to scream and call someone else in the house but unable to move my body. I went to multiple doctors for help. At one point, 30 wires were placed on my head reading my brainwaves. The doctor told me to "have a comfortable sleep" as he sat at the other side of the glass and monitored my sleep patterns. The results revealed nothing. Over the following months, I experienced various seemingly unrelated conditions. I sought out specialists who ran scans to see if my symptoms indicated allergies, diabetes, or some immune issue. Nothing. This continued into college: EMG scans, multiple

cortisone injections, MRIs, acupuncture needling, and chiropractic adjustments. Nothing was conclusive. The car accident exacerbated much of this: more doctors, more aching, more disorientation.

Recognizing that the line between our physical and mental states is blurred—if it exists at all—it becomes clear that mental abuse, let's say, nightly repentance to a conglomeration of fears, is not all that different from physical abuse. My bodily conditions were never accurately diagnosed perhaps because no doctor knew to question my nightly prayer rituals. The anxieties that prayer triggered for me manifested physically. Similar to a self-flagellating ascetic, I had spent years punishing myself, using prayer as my tool.

In the midst of the chaos, I reminded myself of the clarity and interconnectedness that had once been more present in my life. Those thoughts compelled me to grab my keys, throw my tripod and camera in my trunk, turn on some Avett Brothers, and make the trek down to Orchard Beach. This happened regularly between 2013-2014.

There was a similar Pavlovian response to when I took the route as a child, however this was more of a spiritual salivation—a hunger for connection. Along the drive down, I experienced the same sights and sounds as the ride to my grandparents' home: the steady, mechanical hum of the draw bridge as I passed Co Op City, the rhythmic click of the turn signal as I got off two exits before my grandma's exit, and finally the jerk the car made as I got onto Orchard Beach road. Once I parked, I stepped out of the car, bundled up in my winter clothes, and approached the beach.

On one of these visits I stood at the shoreline observing the clouds as they rolled over the 500-foot radio tower that dominates the horizon. I heard voices begin to sing. Standing several

paces behind me were four Chinese Catholic nuns dressed in their habits. With their eyes closed and their bodies swaying with the wind, the women sang their hymns. Their voices reverberated on the ocean, destined for their God. I turned to face the water and became present. Their harmonies served as a soundtrack for my spiritual opening; the water became clearer, the cold, sharper. My entanglement of moral perfection and self-hatred unraveled onto the sand. My skin seemed to fade, leaving no clear border between me and my surroundings. These moments of uninhibited connection brought me back to the beach recurrently. All of the time between those unique moments fades, leaving a consistent lineage of introspection, clarity, and nostalgia.

When the nuns concluded, I headed back to the boardwalk. Along the way, I encountered an older couple, both in their 80s, acting like newlyweds. The old woman clutched the man's elbow as they played like schoolchildren—tickling and lightheartedly taunting one another. The dye stains on her scalp suggested that the woman had recently dyed her hair auburn. Wrapped around her neck was a white scarf with purple and green floral patterns. The man wore a tan flap cap that reminded me of one Aldo used to wear. Since I lacked the nerve to ask to take their portrait, I pretended to take a landscape shot of the boardwalk so that when they walked by, they would enter the frame. The woman made a humorous gesture of vanity as she approached me. She asked if I was photographing them. Feeling slightly guilty, I assured her that that was not my intention, gesturing at the landscape behind her. She looked over her shoulder to where I was pointing, nodded, and then said she would be delighted if I took their portrait. So, I positioned them with their backs toward the ocean and set up my shot. As I photographed them, I said “You guys seem like newlyweds.” The woman responded “We’ve only been married for 11 years. We’re first cousins, you know.” She continued to explain that though they were both born in South Africa, they were raised in separate countries: she in Romania, he in France. They reunited

12 years ago in the states after he had divorced and she became a widow. They fell in love and chose to marry, knowing that they wanted to spend the final years of their lives together. Their audaciousness, lack of inhibitions, and joy moved me. I wondered what Aldo would have thought of them.

A few weeks later, during another trip to Orchard Beach, small ice pellets began to fall from the sky. Tucking my camera under my jacket, I jogged back to my car. As I approached the parking lot, I noticed a procession of cars, each with their hazard lights on. After making a loop around the beach's main promenade, the cars stopped and a group of 30 well dressed people paraded onto the boardwalk. Most wore black; several held white balloons. I stood at a distance—on the line I believed to be between curiosity and respectability—and surveyed the crowd as they listened to a priest who had his back facing the shore. Several people released balloons in the sky once the priest commenced. The group applauded the proceedings with enthusiasm. I recalled the last time I heard such passion in the meeting of hands.

Just five years earlier, I wrapped my hand around the icy bronze bar attached to my grandfather's casket, guiding it across the marble aisle of Saint Raymond's Church with the other men in my family. At the end of the aisle we stepped away from the casket, handing Aldo over to the pallbearers. The sound of the organ playing Ave Maria flooded the streets as the funeral director opened the doors of the church. At the bottom of the stairs were a group of Aldo's fellow clergymen who applauded, honoring his service to his Catholic archdiocese. I will never forget the sincerity in their applause.

I shifted my gaze from the rising balloons back down to the crowd at the boardwalk. I was struck by the flashy attire of one young woman among the black-cloaked crowd. In contrast to the other mourners, she wore gold stilettos, white leggings, and white fur that engulfed her

small frame. After the crowd dispersed, I approached her. She explained that her mother, Sharon, had just passed away after fighting lung cancer. Sharon, a New-Jerseyian, frequented the beach until her last few weeks.

While I crouched down to photograph the young woman, the connection between the beach and her mother threw her into a succession of emotions from hysterical laughter to tears. A man called her from the parking lot, requesting that she come back so that the procession could continue to the cemetery—it seemed that the balloon-releasing at Orchard Beach was a pit stop between the church service and the burial. The woman shook my hand and trotted towards the hearse, avoiding the ice patches on the ground.

An unusual cold stretch hit Orchard Beach during the late winter of 2014. The temperature must have dropped five degrees during my brief walk from the parking lot to the boardwalk. Though few people were there that day, I caught sight of one of the regulars at the other end of the beach. I had seen her a few times before, but we had never interacted. Bundled tightly in winter clothes, she paced around the boardwalk with her hands held together near her face, as if in a constant prayer. She often approached various people and swayed her clasped hands back and forth to them. This peculiar behavior led me to believe that she was a missionary. I avoided her.

One day, at a small pond adjacent to the boardwalk, I photographed several geese huddled together on the water. A thin layer of ice formed around them. I zipped my jacket a bit higher; it was frigid. My exposed fingers on the camera soon became numb, but I ignored the pain, considering it a small price to pay for the photographs I might produce. A bit later, I couldn't press my finger down on the shutter. Startled, I jogged to the other side of the boardwalk to the bathroom to warm up. Once inside, I nudged the hand dryer knob with my

elbow and the warm air began to bring sensation back to my hands. After regaining some feeling, I ventured back outside to continue photographing.

The woman who I had ignored approached me as I exited the restroom. A wave of anxiety flooded through my body as I awaited the religious condemnation of a missionary, “Follow Jesus or go to Hell!” Yet, she stood silently before me. I greeted her and in turn she nodded her head. After a few moments of confusion, I realized the woman was both mute and mentally challenged. She looked down at my camera, smiled, and then positioned herself in the middle of two pillars behind her. As I looked through the lens, she brought her clasped hands closer to her face. What I assumed would be a brash hostile interaction was instead a quiet one.

She swayed her hands back and forth like a metronome on its slowest gear, seemingly trying to communicate something with the repeated gesture. Her motion quickened until the thrusting of her hands matched the pulsing of my heart. I felt a flash of insight and connectedness—each movement of her hands allowed me to go deeper into this state. She became more than just a person—she was a living reminder of the fragility and immediacy of my existence. Here, I thought, is this being standing across from me, made out of the same cosmic matter as me, reminding me to be aware, to notice. Abruptly, the woman’s hands stopped. She nodded her head again then continued her stroll along the boardwalk as if we never interacted. The intensity of the meeting stuck with me throughout the day.

Orchard Beach was a personal battleground—the site of my civil war between dogma and autonomy. Surely, this internal battle wasn’t confined to the beach—however, it was there that the conflict became most gruesome. During those beach outings, I bounced between moments of severe sadness and unrestrained clarity. In the midst of this clash, I interacted with others who also roamed the lonesome beach—they were my fellow pilgrims. Who else but a pilgrim would

choose to venture there during the frigid off-season? In my moments of dejection these pilgrims were my companions; in my moments of clarity, they were my confirmation. Their baggage seemed to lead each of them to this off-season pilgrimage. We were all wandering alone, together.

“Your grandfather was in his glory, suffering for his God.” When my grandmother uttered these words my mental floodgate opened and I recalled my winter days trekking through Orchard Beach: my hands numbing while grasping my camera, the frigid wind bursting through the threads of my jacket, the hail pellets hammering onto me from the clouds above, and the feelings of dejection engulfing me in a chill that surpassed any cold a thermometer could read. Instead of choosing to visit the beach during the open season when crowds mingled and enjoyed the warmth of summer, I went in the midst of the New York winter. Similar to my grandfather’s retreat experience, I willingly made and embraced a pilgrimage to a place that was deserted and cold. It was in suffering that I would find relief from my pain, in solitude that I could feel connected to others, in the cold that I could find warmth—or so I had believed.

When I graduated high school, a close friend of mine handed me a copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self Reliance.” During my turbulent college years, I frequently returned to one passage as a source of refuge: “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinions; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” Emerson’s words deeply resonated with me and helped me formulate a worldview when I was too lost to do so myself: to balance between opposites, action and solitude, and to not allow oneself to fall too far onto one end of the

spectrum—that is genius. To embrace the constant struggle between the two while continuing to aim for the balance—that is to be a pilgrim.

Orchard Beach was where I sought solitude: the intrapersonal, the frigid honesty and clarifying winds of introspection. My grandparent's home was where I sought action: the interpersonal, the never-changing warmth of double cheek embraces and browning chicken cutlets. On various occasions, I declined invites to family suppers in favor of journeying to the beach. I viewed being completely in solitude—lost out on the beaches and waters of my mind—as a noble endeavor. Little did I know that I was losing my balance.

For months I was obsessed with constantly making connections between my retreat experience at the beach and Aldo's at the monastery. Ironically, I found myself back at the beach on several occasions, trying to make sense of all of this.

Enthusiastically, I shared my emerging insights about the beach and my grandparent's home with my cousin Bob over dinner. Aldo's painting of God represented the personal demon I had been battling, the people with whom I interacted at the beach were my fellow pilgrims, and my treks down to the beach were a ritual. After going on for about an hour, Bob stopped me to share a personal experience of his; the mental image of God that he held as a child came from Aldo's oil painting of John F. Kennedy. This confirmed my entire perspective.

A few days later, during a weeknight supper at my grandmother's house, I told her the effect that the paintings had on my cousin and me. She didn't think much of it. After she offered to prepare me a second helping of lentil soup, which I accepted without hesitation, she noted that the image that had affected me wasn't even a depiction of God. That painting, she explained, was an illustration of a fisherman that my grandfather had never completed. To him, I learned, it had no religious significance. Rosalie then clarified the parts of the image carefully recalling Aldo's

intention when he worked on it.

I excused myself from the dinner table and ventured down to Café Preti to take another look. As I stood in front of the canvas, I watched the same brushstrokes take on new meaning. What I held to be a mystical cloak shifted into an orange rain jacket. The figure was no longer looking down upon the sinners of the world; he was in deep contemplation while scouting the oceans ahead. The white clouds from which the figure emerged cleared, revealing the blank canvas that Aldo had yet to paint.

I noticed a gold streak of paint that ran from the fisherman's neck to the side of his body. Was it a part of his uniform? Was it a rope? A net? An oar? For years I had attempted to determine what Aldo would think of my ideologies and personal decisions. Similar to my guesses regarding the meaning of the gold streak, any answer that I had regarding my grandfather's views wouldn't be conclusive. The fact is I cannot speak for him—no one can.

My former perspective of the painting was the basis of the mental map I spent months constructing. I had used that map to survey the people and sites of Orchard Beach. Were those experiences just as partial and inconclusive as my former understanding of Aldo's oil painting?

While I stood in front of the painting, it dawned on me that I had the autonomy to choose how I saw the image. I always had. Experiencing the painting as God made my personal demons palpable. Experiencing the beach-goers as pilgrims and my trips as a pilgrimage allowed for the experience I needed to face my anxieties and begin to make a personal transformation. I now realize that autonomy is choosing how to experience the oil painting in Café Preti, the elements of Orchard Beach, and everything else in my world, for that matter.

For years, I thought that I had to go further into the cold, into the depths of myself, to find the warmth that I was seeking. Now I realize that I need to continue driving on the Hutch

parkway. Instead of getting off the exit towards Orchard Beach, I need to head instead to my grandparent's home. I will go to Café Preti, look at the large oil painting and choose to see the fisherman that Aldo had intended—allowing the cloak to be a rain jacket, the clouds to be blank canvas, and the golden blotch of paint to be forever unknown. A return to myself—to walk as steadily as possible on the forever-shaking tightrope between solitude and action—calls for a balance between the frigid honesty of Orchard Beach and the warmth of my grandparent's dinner table.



27°, Orchard Beach



21°, Orchard Beach



36°, Orchard Beach



43°, Orchard Beach



15°, Orchard Beach



17°, Orchard Beach



51°, Orchard Beach



41°, Orchard Beach



31°, Orchard Beach



29°, Orchard Beach



28°, Orchard Beach



26°, Orchard Beach



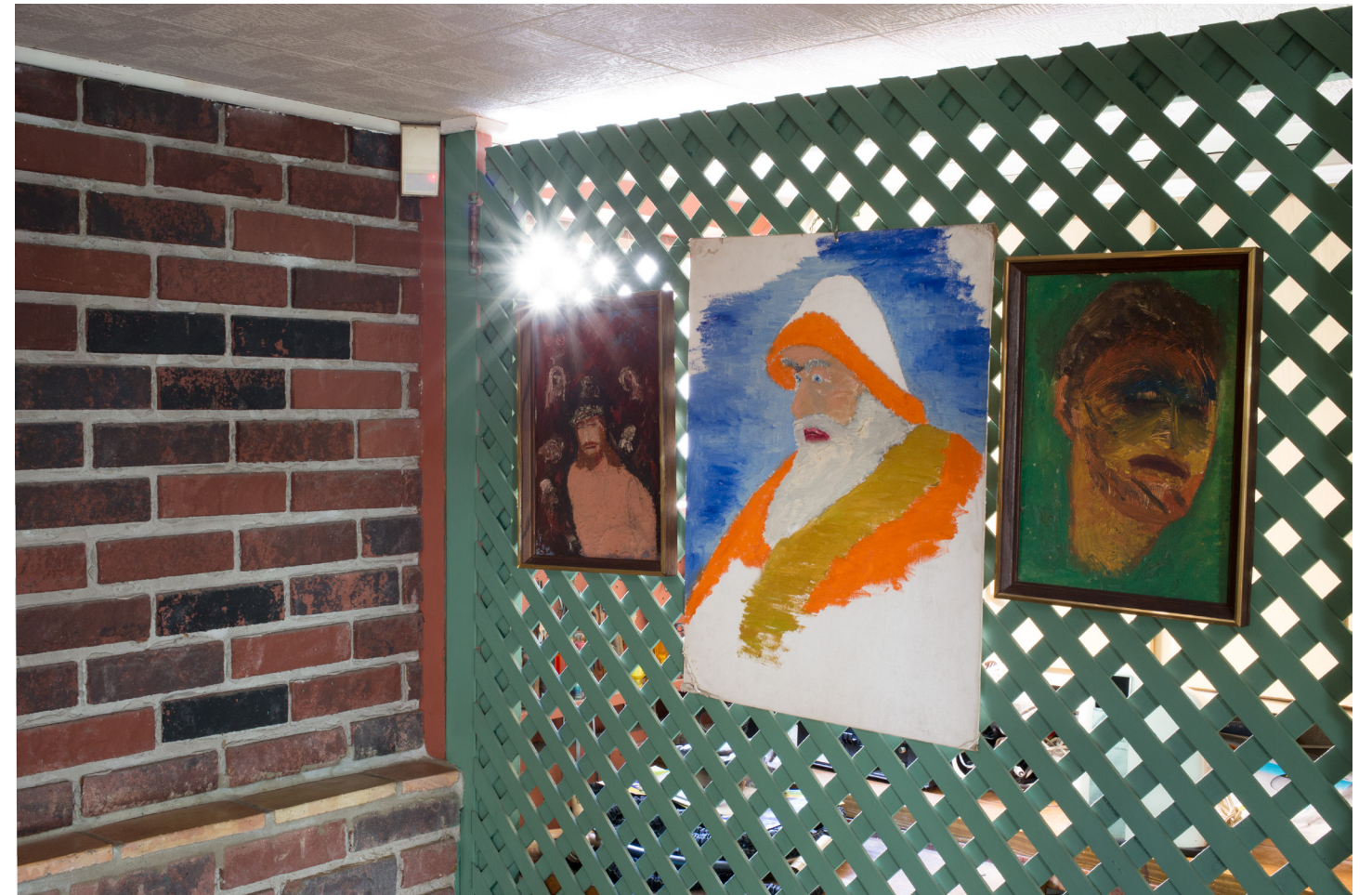
24°, Orchard Beach



37°, Orchard Beach



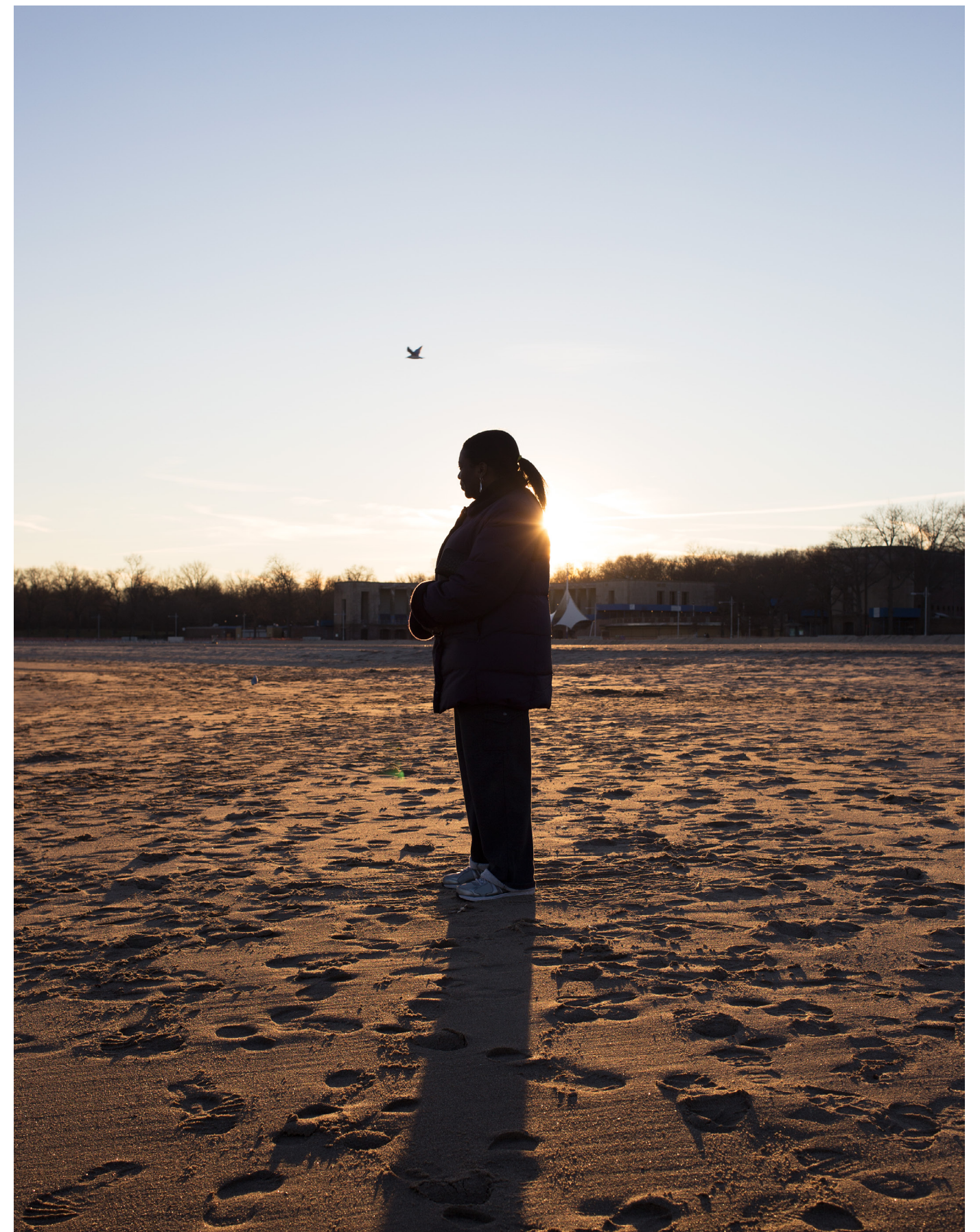
76°, Aldo's Home



78°, Aldo's Home



74°, Aldo's Home



40°, Orchard Beach



39°, Orchard Beach



38°, Orchard Beach



19°, Orchard Beach



1°, Orchard Beach

Mapping *Orchard Beach*

-Vincent Aldo Preti-

My memoir and collection of photographs entitled *Orchard Beach* display the various spaces, objects, and people that I used to orient myself during a particularly tumultuous period of my life. Using Orchard Beach, my grandparents' Bronx home, an oil painting of a fisherman, and various other elements, I physically mapped my internal woes and personal ambitions as a way to situate myself and ultimately transform. This theme of orientation in space has been of great interest to scholars in the academic study of religion, specifically Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Z. Smith, former colleagues at the University of Chicago. Though both Eliade and Smith agree that humans use space to orient themselves, their foundational understandings of orientation differ sharply, as do their views on scholars and practitioners. This paper will explore their competing perspectives, consider *Orchard Beach* through each lens, and finally argue that Smith's interpretation aligns more closely with the experiences detailed in my artwork.

Mircea Eliade on "Orientation"

Mircea Eliade holds a conception of orientation and place rooted in the classic sacred-profane dichotomy. Sociologist Émile Durkheim lays out this dichotomy in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*: "The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane—such is the distinctive trait of religious thought" (Durkheim, 34). Here, Durkheim explains that the groupings of the sacred and the profane are at the core of religious experience. Eliade believes that this Durkheimian understanding is not only found in one's mental perspective: the sacred and the profane can be experienced spatially. In his aptly titled book *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade coins the term hierophany to refer to a physical

manifestation of the sacred, locations where “something sacred shows itself to us” (Eliade, 11). Sacred forces beyond the comprehension of mankind reveal themselves through these physical centers. These spaces differ sharply from profane space: the sacred eruptions are unique and stable while profane space is homogeneous and chaotic. Since profane space is homogenous, humans cannot orient themselves in it—they need these unique, sacred hierophanies in order to understand themselves and their place in the cosmos. Accordingly, the human’s job isn’t choosing their sacred center, but finding it: “Human beings do not construct their world so much as they discover or recognize the distinctions, the sacred places, that supernatural beings introduced to the world” (Gill, “Territory” 302). Though humans have the power to choose the modalities through which they interact with the sacred, Eliade emphasizes that it is sacred forces, and not humans, that create these centers.

In Eliade’s view, both practitioners and scholars of religion share the task of locating themselves around sacred centers, however their roles are distinctly different: practitioners use myths and rituals, academics use data and theory. Hierophanies are the center point for a practitioner’s religious experience. Myths are accounts of these sacred centers: these stories are focused on origins, beginnings, centers, etc. Rituals are how humans attempt to return to that center—to move closer to the sacred. The scholar of religion, on the other hand, has the ability to find sacred centers and report on them: “Eliade’s work proceeded from the assumption that, structurally speaking, the sacred is everywhere essentially the same as is the structure of the human response to the sacred. Thus the student of religion knows at the outset the structure and pattern of the sacred” (Gill, 306). In this way, all religions are united: every tradition has a distinct sacred center and all religious devotees are interacting with those centers. The role of the scholar is different from that of the practitioner; though the scholar of religion grounds their studies around

sacred centers, they approach them as an observer. Eliade's understanding of religion is rooted in sameness, though the roles of practitioners and scholars are different.

Jonathan Z. Smith on “Orientation”

In stark contrast to Eliade—who understood the human's job to be orienting themselves around pre-existing sacred centers—Jonathan Z. Smith suggests that humans have the creative sovereignty to orient themselves. Though Smith agrees with Eliade that orientation is a key feature of religious experience, he doesn't believe that anything is inherently sacred. Also, Smith does not posit that a space must be deemed “sacred” for it to be significant. For Smith, territory offers “basic world-building tools” for humans when they attempt to situate or orient themselves in the world (Gill, 305). Thus for Smith, “[religion] is a mode of creating and discovering worlds of meaning and the discourse upon territory is the enterprise of creativity and discovery” (Gill, 305). This creative human impulse tied to orientation and space is best understood through Smith's concepts of focusing lenses and mapping.

In “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” Smith expounds upon his idea of focusing lenses—one of two key aspects of orientation for him. He begins with the following anecdotes to set up his discussion of focusing lenses:

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes a part of the ceremony.

At Athens, Lysimache, the priestess of Athene Polias, when asked for a drink by

the mule drivers who had transported the sacred vessels, replied ‘No, for I fear it will get into the ritual’ (Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual” 113).

Smith elaborates that these two accounts include the routinization of and imposition of significance onto accidents. In the footnotes, he provides a clarifying example of an accident that has been routinized and signified into ritual. During the Exodus of the Israelites in Egypt, the Israelites were not able to leaven their bread. This accident was given significance and then it became routinized into the Passover ritual. Smith draws our attention to the role of the temple in both stories. He defines the temple as a focusing lens: a marked-off space in which everything can gain significance and nothing is an accident. Though both of the stories above share the mentioned qualities of ritual, they differ sharply in their circumscription of the elements of their rituals. What is it about the first story that allows the accident to become adopted into the ritual while the accident in the second story is refused? A simple conclusion to come to would be to see the leopards as somehow more special than the mule drivers. From here, it would seem that the former is religious while the latter is secular. That would explain why the leopards became a part of the ceremony while the mule drivers were shooed away. To Smith, this is an unwise supposition for “leopards in a jungle seem as commonplace as mule drivers in a city” (Smith, 114). So then, if neither of these groups are inherently sacred/profane, religious/secular, special/mundane, what allows one group to be a part of the ritual and the other not? Smith continues to say that groupings such as sacred and profane “are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing that is in-itself sacred, only things sacred-in-relation-to” (Smith, 115). What allows the leopards to be adopted into the ritual and what casts the mule drivers aside is “the map being employed.” Though everything in the

“focusing lens” has the potential to be significant, not everything can be because this would lead to either “insanity or banality” (Smith, 116). So, the practitioner deploys their “economy of signification”: they choose what to include and what to exclude from the bounds of their ritual (Smith, 117). Smith’s notion of a focusing lens provides insight into his understanding of orientation. Inside of these selected spaces of importance we choose what to include and exclude in order to make sense of ourselves, to refine our rituals, to fuel our narratives, and to ultimately orient ourselves. In this way, Smith understands humans to have more sovereignty in orientation than does Eliade.

The phrase “the map being employed” in “The Bare Facts of Ritual” is a reference to Smith’s notion of mapping—his second key concept regarding orientation. In *Map is Not Territory*, Smith complicates Alfred Korzybski’s famous dictum, “the map is not territory.” If we take “territory” to mean one’s dynamic, subjective experience and “map” to be one’s personal worldview, this statement suggests that humans cannot know our experience itself as we impose so much of our worldview onto it. We can only see the map that we create. Smith puts forth two types of maps of the world: the locative and the utopian. The locative is “a map of the world which guarantees meaning and value through structures of congruity and conformity” (Smith, *Map is Not Territory* 292). Those engaging with a locative worldview intend to have a map that corresponds perfectly with their territory—their goal would be a map scale of “one to one” (Gill, “No Place to Stand” 290-291). Ideally, no incongruities or surprises exist in this worldview: the map explains all territory. The utopian map, on the other hand, “perceives terror and confinement in interconnection, correspondence and repetition” (Smith, *Map is Not Territory* 309). Those with a utopian map as their goal want to rid themselves of biased worldviews and instead directly experience the territory for what it *really* is. While each mapping strategy has distinct means, they

are both attempt to close the gap between map and territory. The locative seeks to achieve this through seamless correspondence, the utopian through abolishing worldviews (Gill, “Territory” 308).

Though some scholars have seen the locative and the utopian maps as being titles for categories in which various religious traditions are placed, not all agree that these two maps are supposed to be separate, fixed categories. With the recognition that neither of these maps can be wholly achieved, Professor Sam Gill at the University of Colorado Boulder has slightly rephrased Smith’s language of “maps” to “mapping strategies” as to avoid the idea that the locative and the utopian are stagnant categories (Gill, *Dancing, Culture, Religion* 197). This emphasis on movement is further supported when looking at Smith’s third map of the cosmos:

These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought (Smith, *Map is Not Territory* 309).

This third map, or mapping strategy, that Smith puts forth emphasizes the play and the movement between the locative and the utopian attitudes. In this way, locative and utopian are not umbrella categories for the scholar to group various traditions. Instead, the two mapping strategies are ends on a massively complex spectrum of meaning-making: sometimes humans seek interconnection and meaning, sometimes they seek experience without worldview, and sometimes they play in-between both ends of the spectrum. The various points on this spectrum represent the infinite ways

in which humans attempt to close the gap between map and territory. This is how Smith's map-territory understanding fits into his larger perspective of orientation: human creativity lies in the gap between map and territory. Humans make sense of themselves, their life circumstances, and their place in the cosmos by playfully filling this gap. How one attempts to fill it—be it through a locative attitude, a utopian one, or some middle-of-the-spectrum means—is how one orients oneself.

The mapping of the religious scholar and the practitioner is very similar in Smith's view. Just as the practitioner situates her or himself to move about the world, the scholar must do the same in order to approach their subject of study. Gill explains that while "religion maps, constructs, and inhabits 'through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation,' the study of religion maps through the 'imaginative acts of comparison and generalization'" (Gill, "No Place to Stand" 286). There does not seem to be much of a distinction between the scholar and the practitioner in Smith's map-territory discussion. This differs greatly from Eliade who sees a distinctive difference between the roles of the two groups. Though both scholars emphasize comparison in their studies, Eliade's understanding of comparison is rooted in sameness. That is to say, though the modalities through which humans interact with sacred centers differ greatly, the studied traditions are all similar in their revolving around centers. Conversely, Smith does not root comparison in sameness. Instead, he views religious experience as varied as the creative human imagination allows.

Mapping *Orchard Beach*

Now that the contesting theoretical perspectives of Eliade and Smith have been laid out, they will be employed to analyze the experiences presented in *Orchard Beach*. In the subsequent

examination, I will not concern myself with attempting to prove whether or not my past experiences were “religious” or “sacred” experiences: both words are fraught with baggage that will take us away from the aim of this piece. Placing the religiosity and sacrality of my past experiences aside, Smith’s and Eliade’s theories regarding space and orientation can be used to analyze the spatial, intrapersonal, and communal interactions illustrated in *Orchard Beach*.

Orientation:

The theme of orientation is prevalent throughout *Orchard Beach*. While in a turbulent phase of my life, I used external elements—various “pilgrims” at Orchard Beach, a prayer gesture, my grandfather’s oil paintings, and other elements—to comprehend what was occurring in my life. Making the intangible tangible allowed me to ultimately make a personal transformation.

“Prayers were the barrier between our hunger and our satiation. Us grandkids—Bob, Lisa, Tom, and I—would bow our heads, wrinkling the coarse tablecloth between our fingers, anticipating the words: “...from thy bounty through Christ, Our Lord, Amen.” Then we would raise our heads and lean forward, like racehorses in the starting gate, awaiting Rosalie’s words ‘Buon Appetito’” (5).

“Then, Aldo took the stage and began with an opening prayer; I put my hands together and glanced between my grandfather and the cross” (6).

“A few days after the accident, I was in complete despair: my outlook was darkening and my body was inflamed and stiff. Lying in bed, I touched my hand to my forehead, then to my chest, one tap on each side, and returned my hands back together, a familiar gesture; I began to pray” (10).

The classic dog experiment performed by Ivan Pavlov works as a good segue between the above text and how I centered myself. To briefly summarize Pavlov's proceedings, before conditioning the dogs, the food (unconditioned stimulus) made the animal salivate while the bell (neutral stimulus) caused no salivation. After a period of time pairing the food and the bell together, the bell, which was formerly a neutral stimulus, became a conditioned stimulus. Each time the dog heard the bell ring, it salivated even though no food was present.

I was raised to perform the Sign of the Cross to enter in and out of prayer. As a child, this gesture was accompanied by emotionally intense environments: familial meals, church services, morning prayers at school, weddings, funerals, etc. In the narrative, I explicate two of these instances: meals at my grandparents' home and Aldo's Stations of the Cross lectures at my school. During these moments of emotional extremities—love, loss, family, gratitude—I performed the Sign of the Cross gesture habitually.

The emotional environments in my youth (unconditioned stimulus) caused emotional responses in me. When I was just a toddler, the prayer gesture (neutral stimulus) alone did nothing. After continually performing the prayer motion in emotional environments, the gesture turned from a neutral stimulus to a conditioned stimulus. So, each time I prayed, whether alone or in a group, I felt an emotional response.

As previously explained, both Eliade and Smith see that humans orient themselves through external entities. After not having prayed for a while, I returned to the physical action of prayer—subconsciously anticipating the emotional comfort that the gesture had provided me with in the past. During my childhood, when I prayed more often, things were much more stable and simple: I was an energetic child lacking the complexities, anxieties, and uneasiness that late adolescence

delivers. Since the car accident marks probably the most chaotic and disorienting event in my life, it makes sense that I reverted to a gesture to orient myself.

“Although now a lost tradition, for years the Preti family regularly visited Orchard Beach” (7).

“When my ideological spine and logistical compass broke in my youth, it was no surprise that I sought out Orchard Beach for refuge” (8).

Similar to how my gestural return helped me center myself, returning to Orchard Beach after a hiatus allowed me to find stability amongst confusion. As a child, I frequented the beach with my family during the open season. It was a space that held childhood simplicity, familial normalcy, and enjoyment. With hindsight, returning to that space later in my youth allowed me to recollect what remained of those securities. Though the beach isn’t necessarily the most serene location, it is surely a retreat away from the chaos of the city that surrounds it. My turbulent experiences all occurred outside of the beach, so it was a safe space void of those troubles. Being in this marked-off area—which held comforts from my past as well as solitude set apart from action—helped me to feel grounded.

Naturally, the matter of orientation is at the heart of *Orchard Beach*—both the gestural return and the spatial return exemplify this. The memoir is sprinkled with more nuanced forms of orientation. The theories of Eliade and Smith will provide insight into those specifics.

Hierophanies:

In my memoir, I establish three places that were influential in my youth: Orchard Beach, my grandparents' home in The Bronx, and the church I attended when I was in elementary school. Had Eliade considered my experience, he would have seen that these three places were all sacred centers characterized by hierophanies. Bubbling from the center of each space was a sacred presence that had revealed itself to me. As Eliade claims, it is only through the uniqueness of sacred spaces that humans can orient themselves—it is not possible to make sense of oneself in the homogeneity of profane space. My personal discoveries, my stories, and my ritualistic experiences would thus be attributed to these hierophanies. How else would I have made sense of my world?

Eliade does not present hierophanic encounters between humans and the sacred as wholly enjoyable. In fact, Eliade uses Rudolf Otto's phrase, "*Mysterium tremendum*," to refer to the "*feeling of terror* before the sacred, before the awe-inspiring mystery" (Eliade, 9). These encounters with hierophanies are so extreme, so terrifying, and so enlightening that the human who experiences it spends their life circling around it—using myths and rituals as their tools.

It would not be in accordance with Eliade's descriptions to say that these three places in my life were spaces of hierophanic encounters. First off, even though I have had intense reactions to each space—feelings ranging from stern dejection to uninhibited joy—at no point did I experience something so scarring or obviously sacred. Furthermore, though these locations have all had a consistent presence in my life, the importance of each ebbed and flowed over the years. If these locations were sacred centers, why would their influence change? Why would the power of these experiences lose their affects on me?

From here, Eliade could claim that I have never experienced a hierophany; he could say that these spaces were not sacred centers. In this view, since I wasn't experiencing sacred centers I must have been experiencing profane space. But then, how was I able to orient myself if I have only existed in profane space? It was Eliade after all who said we cannot orient ourselves in the homogeneity and chaos of profane space. Clearly, as the narrative and the following analysis will show, I oriented myself and made sense of my world without needing hierophanies.

Focusing Lens:

Orchard Beach was a focusing lens for me, to use the phrase coined by Smith in "The Bare Facts of Ritual." When I passed through the fee station gates, entering the grounds of Orchard Beach, everything and anything I experienced could potentially gain significance. Had the same action occurred both inside and outside of this demarcated space, its potential for signification would differ.

"She swayed her hands back and forth like a metronome on its slowest gear, seemingly trying to communicate something with the repeated gesture. Her motion quickened until the thrusting of her hands matched the pulsing of my heart. I felt a flash of insight and connectedness—each movement of her hands allowed me to go deeper into this state. She became more than just a person—she was a living reminder of the fragility and immediacy of my existence" (16).



19°, Orchard Beach

In the narrative, I focus on various beach-goers that I interacted with during the two years of frequenting Orchard Beach. I viewed my fellow beach-goers as pilgrims of the off-season: in the focusing lens, it made sense to do so. Surely, I meant something different to each one of them. While I viewed them in this way, I'm sure a few of them wondered what a young man was doing photographing the beach during a school day.

One encounter that still stands out to me was with an older woman that I thought was a missionary. When the woman approached me, I was struck with fear: I thought that she would begin a confrontation, pleading that I repent. Though I still do not know her religious affiliation, I did learn about her during our encounter. She turned out to be mentally challenged and mute. The swaying of her hands, that I had thought was a pleading motion of a missionary, seemed to be a motor tic.

Retrospectively, I realize that the focusing lens through which I viewed the beach led me to encounter this woman in a symbolic, even spiritual way. When I ventured to the beach, I was more open and susceptible to experiencing and creating symbolism. Thus, I read the woman's motor tic symbolically and then experienced it as a spiritual reminder to notice my breath, my heartbeat, and my sentience. I went to the beach to find such messages, and so I found them.



17°, Orchard Beach

This photograph, taken on my walk back to my car in Orchard Beach's parking lot, is a great illustration of how being inside of a focusing lens helped me to materially externalize my internal thoughts. The prominent elements of the image—the sun-faded photo of Jesus in the backseat, the clouds reflected onto the windshield, and the two crosses hanging from the rear-view mirror—were all placed together in a line of focus. Had I not been in Orchard Beach, a space that I had circumscribed as being significant, I would not have examined the cars in the parking lot in such a particular way. However, since Orchard Beach was a focusing lens for me, I lined up the elements of the photograph from a particular angle and then chose to view what I had shot in a symbolic way. This photo reminded me of my grandfather's beliefs and my uncertainties about the various dogmas spinning in my head.



28°, 26°, 24°, 37°, Orchard Beach

One day at the beach, I spent about twenty minutes circling around a desolate playground on the sand. I recalled some of the loneliness I experienced in my late childhood; I felt that I grew up too early. A few days later, I saw a child standing alone next to the shoreline. Both the empty playground and the child removed from it reminded me of this reality. Had someone else seen me surveying and photographing the slide and jungle gym they might have scratched their head—but for me, doing this made perfect sense. It would not have made sense however, if I had walked up to a playground in a random Manhattan neighborhood and photographed it.

During this phase of exploration in my life, my grandfather's house also became a focusing lens. It was no longer just the place where I gathered with family and had dinner: the elements of the house—its structure, contents, and the social interactions inside of it—all had the potential to become signified or symbolic. Of course, as Smith points out, not everything gained significance—that would have led to “insanity or banality” (Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual” 116). Instead, I chose what to include and exclude in my symbolic world. By employing what Smith calls “the economy of signification,” I chose “What to include? What to hear as a message? What to see as a sign? What to perceive as a double entendre? What to exclude? What to allow to remain as background noise? What to understand as simply ‘happening’?” (Smith, 116). What makes the focusing lens concept especially appropriate is my use of a camera. The camera was an

intermediary between myself and my surroundings, furthering the unique eye through which I approached the beach. Behind the lens of my camera, I interacted with this designated significant space as if there were photographs with symbolism waiting to be taken.

Now then, what allowed me to make those decisions? Surely, I was not surveying Orchard Beach and my grandfather's home holding a checklist of all the elements of both places writing yes's and no's next to them. To recall, Smith explains that groupings such as sacred/profane, religious/secular, and special/mundane "are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing that is in-itself sacred, only things sacred-in-relation-to" (Smith, 115). What allowed me to make these decisions—mainly subconsciously, but sometimes not—was "the map being employed."

Map and Territory:

For the purposes of this Smithian reading, "map" refers to my constantly shifting worldview and "territory" refers to my dynamic life experience. While many elements of my map described in *Orchard Beach* were the result of years spent consciously creating and discovering, the vast majority were unconscious. Naturally, every experience that I have ever had—both that which I explicitly recall and that which I have forgotten—contributes to my constantly updating and shifting worldview. My reactions to experiences (the territory) are based on my map. Just as my map is dynamic, so too is my territory: my experiences are in constant flux and movement. Presented in the memoir are clear instances of locative and utopian mapping strategies.

Locative Map:

“For months I was obsessed with constantly making connections between my retreat experience at the beach and Aldo’s at the monastery. Ironically, I found myself back at the beach on several occasions, trying to make sense of all of this.

Enthusiastically, I shared my emerging insights about the beach and my grandparent’s house with my cousin Bob over dinner. Aldo’s painting of God represented the personal demon I had been battling, the people with whom I interacted at the beach were my fellow pilgrims, and my treks down to the beach were a ritual. After going on for about an hour, Bob stopped me to share a personal experience of his; the mental image of God that he held as a child came from Aldo’s oil painting of John F. Kennedy. This confirmed my entire perspective” (18).

The locative attitude presented by Smith is one that attempts to obtain a coherent map explanatory of all territory. When my cousin empathized with me—explaining that as a child, he also saw a connection between one of my grandfather’s paintings and God—it felt as if the weeks I spent creating symbols and making meaning were confirmed. To use Smith’s concepts, I got the closest to a wholly locative map; for every occurrence relating to my family or Orchard Beach, I had an answer.

Utopian Map:

“I turned to face the water and became present. Their harmonies served as a soundtrack for my spiritual opening; the water became clearer, the cold, sharper. My entanglement of moral perfection and self-hatred unraveled onto the sand. My

skin seemed to fade, leaving no clear border between me and my surroundings. These moments of uninhibited connection brought me back to the beach recurrently” (13).

Utopian maps, as presented by Smith, are attitudes that perceive total coherence and interconnection negatively, and instead seek to have a direct experience with territory that is devoid of personal interpretations. In this excerpt, when I stood on the shoreline of the beach, I felt tired of all of my rumination, meaning-making, and introspection. For a few moments, as I listened to the nuns sing their hymns, I was able to silence these inquiries and enjoy the landscape of the beach. It felt as if I had been stripped of my worldviews and able to experience the beach for what it *really* was. In contrast to when my cousin shared his experience, and I felt as if I obtained a wholly locative map, this instance at the shoreline is the closest that I got to a wholly utopian map.

The Third Map:

“A few days later, during a weeknight supper at my grandmother’s house, I told her the effect that the paintings had on my cousin and me. She didn’t think much of it. After she offered to prepare me a second helping of lentil soup, which I accepted without hesitation, she noted that the image that had affected me wasn’t even a depiction of God. That painting, she explained, was an illustration of a fisherman that my grandfather had never completed. To him, I learned, it had no religious significance. Rosalie then clarified the parts of the image carefully recalling Aldo’s intention when he worked on it.

I excused myself from the dinner table and ventured down to Café Preti to

take another look. As I stood in front of the canvas, I watched the same brushstrokes take on new meaning. What I held to be a mystical cloak shifted into an orange rain jacket. The figure was no longer looking down upon the sinners of the world; he was in deep contemplation while scouting the oceans ahead. The white clouds from which the figure emerged cleared, revealing the blank canvas that Aldo had yet to paint” (18-19).



78°, Aldo's Home

When my grandmother informed me that Aldo's "God" painting was actually an image of a fisherman, I became cognizant of my personal gap-closing strategies. Since a large portion of my worldview (my map) was based on the understanding that my grandfather's painting was a depiction of God, my grandmother's correction led to a sudden and drastic shift in perspective. In turn, this allowed me to step back, so to speak, and consider the months that I spent making meaning; it was a sort of meta-reflection.

Had I learned about my grandfather's artistic intention when I was younger, it probably wouldn't have meant much to me; most likely, I would have nodded my head and changed my ideas about the image. Since I learned this information at an older age, when I was so self-reflective, I was able to investigate my own deliberations.

In *A Critical Introduction to The Study of Religion*, Professor Craig Martin at St. Thomas Aquinas College suggests, “the constellations we pull out from among the various stars in the sky depend on what interests us” (Martin, 23). Though Martin was specifically referring to the ways thinkers historically categorize and make sense of the same phenomena, his declaration can be broadened: all humans pull from the cosmos that which interests them. With my grandmother’s clarification I recognized that I saw what I wanted and needed to see in the painting, at the beach, in my life’s narrative, in order to make the personal changes that I wanted and needed to. It became clear to me, when I reevaluated the painting, that I drew, refined, and erased lines between various stars in order to overcome personal obstacles. Though Smith and Martin use separate analogies—mapping for Smith and constellations for Martin—they are more or less speaking on the same human activity: personal orientation through meaning-making.

Smith’s third mapping strategy emphasizes meta-reflection; it highlights life’s incongruities and recognizes the inability to ever experience territory without maps, or to ever truly see stars without constellations. In a lively tone, Smith declares that “it is both wonderful and unaccountable, perhaps even comic or crazy, that sometimes our playful imagination, our arguments about and mental construals of the world turn out to have real consequences” (Smith, *On Teaching Religion* 128). Mapping my grandparent’s home as action and Orchard Beach as solitude (as based on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s quote), viewing my personal demons inside of a painting that had no intended moral significance, experiencing my fellow beach-goers as pilgrims and my treks to the beach as pilgrimages—these were the ways in which I played. But as Smith points out, this play is not childish; my playful imagination and my mental construals proved to transform me.

Conclusion

Smith's classic concluding line, "'Map is not territory'—but maps are all we possess," seems to have a pessimistic connotation, though he probably hadn't intended it to (Smith, *Map is Not Territory* 309). To some, the latter part of the line could suggest that we are stuck inside of maps, that they are all we have to work with. However, it was through my continual play within the map-making spectrum—attempting to create a perfectly explanatory map, trying to rid myself of worldview, and everything in-between—that I was able to begin a transformation. For years, as stated in the narrative, "I viewed being in solitude—lost out on the beaches and waters of my mind—as a noble endeavor" (17). I felt an intangible struggle, made it tangible, and then—thanks to the map-making, gap-closing processes described—I am now on a personal trajectory bringing me closer to the balance that I have sought between action and solitude.

What the personal discoveries presented in *Orchard Beach* and the theoretical analyses of Eliade, Smith, and Gill have helped me to realize, is that human vitality and creativity exists in the gap between map and territory. If humans were not to have a gap—if we were to achieve our attempted goal of collapsing the gap between map and territory—we would lose an essential part of what makes us human; we wouldn't be able to be self-reflective nor would we be able to make personal transformations. So, all things considered, I offer a slight revision to Smith's famous dictum—a variation that emphasizes movement and embraces life's incongruities:

"'Map is not territory'—and how lucky are we?"

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